feminist review

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The Desire for Categories

BY ALYOSXA TUDOR

Recently, a colleague 'cited' me in a German newspaper article. He deplored that I refuse to see the murder of Theodoros Boulgaridis, committed in 2005 by a (state-supported) Neo-Nazi terror cell in Germany, as racist. The cell targeted migrants and the victims mostly had a migration history from Turkey[1]—Theodoros Boulgaridis was the only victim with a Greek background. My colleague accused me of offending the bereaved family by constructing the victim as 'white'. The problem is, however, that I have never talked about the case, I literally have never said the sentence that was ascribed to me in that newspaper article.

I assume this misquotation comes out of a desire for categories and boxes that is projected onto my knowledge production. I do understand this need for certainties, which comes with the struggle of naming structural violence. How can we find words that are strong enough to make clear that people are being killed because they are being read as migrants? However, my conceptualisation of migratism is epistemological and not ontological—it is not about boxes, but rather about critically examining the ascription of belonging to a certain category. My aim is to offer an approach that helps us think and do things we were not able to think and do without it. Is a political murder only a political murder when the reason is racism? Is it somehow 'less bad' when someone is being killed because of being migratised, ascribed as a migrant, rather than being racialised as non-white? How do we even know from the nationality/migration background of a person if they are white or not? What would it mean to analyse the case as a misreading in a series of anti-Muslim resp. anti-Turkish killings (How are these two categories related)? How can we make sense of ambivalences and contradictions and the blurry cross-fadings of racialisation and migratisation?

'Dimensions of Transnationalism' is about mis/readings on many levels. The mis/reading of gender, the mis/reading of racialisation and the mis/reading of nationality and their complex crossovers. Moreover, it discusses being read, passing and performativity in connection to trans/gender and ascriptions of migration. While I want to show that the 'real' behind being read is not stable and that every reading is a misreading, building on the work of Jasbir Puar (1998) and Sara Ahmed (1999), I investigate possibilities of politicising these complex overlaps.

One less explicit endeavour of 'Dimensions of Transnationalism' is to comment on a theoretical and analytical framework that I have suggested previously: the differentiation of racism and migratism, racialisation and migratisation (Tudor, 2017). As I think of this 'dimension' of the article as less obvious, I decided to take the opportunity to make it explicit in this blog post. I have worked on the epistemological project of making sense of the complex nexus of racism/racialisation with migration in feminist and critical migration

studies knowledge production since 2010 (see, for example, Tudor, 2010 and my seminar on 'Racism and Migratism: The Relevance of a Critical Differentiation'). With this I am in the company of many scholars who engage with the question of how racism and migration are related in Europe (see, for example, the Institute for Race Relations in the UK, the German-based Institute for Research on Migration and Racism and recently a blog post by Umut Erel, Karim Murji and Zaki Nahaboo). My approach stresses the fact that we should ground any attempt to define racism in postcolonial analysis. Therefore, I argue that it makes sense for transnational feminist, queer and trans knowledge productions to differentiate between racism, the power relation that ascribes racialisation, and migratism, the power relation that ascribes migration. Racialisation and migratisation are not the same but they are entangled in complex ways and differentiating them helps us analyse their specifities, while intersectional thinking makes clear that they are not separate but are constitutive for each other in many ways and on many levels.

In 'Dimensions of Transnationalism' (finally published after several years of presenting these ideas on the complexities and contradictions of racialisation and migratisation publicly), I want to invite you to read with me a set of examples in order to pursue exactly the kinds of questions raised here in connection to the Boulgaridis murder. How are *being read* (aka being categorised in a dominant gaze), *passing, being* and *becoming* connected and how could these interconnections be theorised? I examine the example of 'transnationalism' (or cross-border-nationalism) in Romanian migrant communities in Italy and problematise white Romanians' attempts to 'correct' being misread as Roma (using this example). They delineate themselves against being racialised as non-white in a Western European context with the help of racism, nationalism and heterosexism. I analyse this as a reaction to their own marginalisation within hierarchical processes of European belonging and as an attempt to establish Romanianness as 'proper' Europeanness through reproducing racist and heterosexist ideas of kinship, family and origin. '[O]ne could ask if "white Romanians" can *become* "Roma" through repeated performative appellations as "Roma"? Does this happen, and if so, after how many repetitions? For whom does this happen? The white Western Europeans (who are the appellators), or for the de-whitened Romanians (who get appellated) or for the Roma (who become abjects)?' (Tudor, 2018, p. 35).

Another dimension entangled with the ascription of migration, is the ascription of (binary) gendering. Bringing together transgender studies approaches and feminist approaches and in line with Halberstam (1994), Noble (2006), Bhanji (2012) and Enke (2012), I revisit certainties about the categories 'cis' and 'trans', 'migrant' and 'non-migrant'. How can we think of gendering always as a process of becoming and how does this help us to critically examine certainties about 'cis'-gender? How do ascriptions of migration complicate gendered and sexualised readings? '[I]n some cases, it seems to be impossible with a conventionalised repertoire of possibilities of perception to recognise several structural discriminations simultaneously. This means, in reverse, that processes of ascribing make some positionings appear hypervisible and some positionings get constructed as mutually exclusive, while some even get totally erased' (Tudor, 2018, p. 24).

Avtar Brah's question posed in *Cartographies of Diaspora* remains relevant and timely 'How do we construct politics which do not reduce everything to the economy of the same and which do not essentialise differences?' (Brah 1996, 14f). In this spirit, all this is not to determine the exact moment when 'being read' becomes 'being', but to debate the complexities of dominant categorisations and self-identifications and their connection to performative repetition. With this, I want to open up a discussion on critical redefinitions of political agency and call for a conceptualisation of entangled power relations that does not rely on fixed, pre-established categories but defines subjectivity through risk in political struggle.

Alyoxsa's article on 'Dimension of Transnationalism' in Feminist Review Issue 117 is available here.

footnote

1. previous version:'had Turkish backgrounds', edited to make clear that coming from Turkey does not necessarily mean having/identifying with a Turkish national identity

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☐**March 19, 2018**
Uncategorized

intersectionality, migration, migratism, naming, racialisation, racism, structural violence, trans feminism, transgender, transnationalism

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